

Editorial: California water debate going nowhere

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California is having the wrong debate about the future of one of its most valuable assets, the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, which produces water for much of the state and about half of Silicon Valley.

The battle for the better part of the last two years has been about how big a new conveyance system – probably tunnels – should be, how much it should cost, and who should foot the bill. The result has been a political fight of the worst kind, pitting Northern Californians against Southern Californians and agriculture interests against environmentalists in a battle royal. At its worst, this could be one of the biggest water grabs in state history. And for California, that's saying something.

The focus instead should be the operating conditions for the Delta, particularly the amount of water that needs to flow through it annually to maintain the health of the estuary. Once that standard has been established, then everything else will fall into place for the two coequal goals of providing a more reliable water supply and protecting, restoring and improving the Delta ecosystem. Before deciding on tunnels, helicopters, whatever, state water officials need to determine how much water can be expected to be delivered. That will drive how it's allocated and how it should be conveyed.

Why has the debate focused on the conveyance system instead of this basic question? Follow the money.

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